State historical commission can't decide where Drake landed

By Ned MacKay
Times Staff Writer

Sir Francis Drake figuratively dropped anchor, but then hoisted it again almost immediately, at a recent meeting of the State Historical Resources Commission.

The commission voted that Drake's Estero at Point Reyes was "the most generally accepted and probable landing site" of the English explorer during his 1579 visit to California's shores. But the vote was reversed an hour later.

The two votes occurred at a Commission meeting March 2 at Point Richmond. The end result apparently is to leave the question still unresolved.

Three days of hearings and field trips last October had failed to settle conclusively the question of where Drake landed. At that time, the commissioners heard from proponents of landings at Point Reyes, Bolinas Lagoon, and San Quentin Cove, inside San Francisco Bay.

Afterward they decided that the evidence was not definite enough to meet the criteria for establishing a state historical landmark in any one of the suggested locations of Drake's landing.

Knox Mellon, who is the state historical preservation officer and executive secretary to the commission, provided this account of the events March 2 at Point Richmond:

Since the October hearings, the commission has been "inundated with arguments" favoring one site or another, Mellon said.

The commissioners decided on March 2 to hold an hour of discussion on the matter amongst themselves at the public meeting.

Toward the end of the discussion, Commissioner Bob Ferris moved that a plaque be placed at the Point Reyes site designating it as Drake's "probable" landfall. This failed on a 2-to-2 vote, with Commissioner Joyce Sundberg abstaining.

Chairwoman Kathryn Kaiser then called a 10-minute recess.

Upon resumption of the meeting, Ferris moved the commission adopt a resolution stating in part

See DRAKE, Page 5

DRAKE

Continued from Page 1

that Drake's Estero is "the most generally accepted and probable landing site and the location of his (Drake's) contact with the Coast Miwok Indians."

This resolution, sort of a statement of findings, was passed by a vote of 3 to 2, with Commissioner Sundberg in favor of it.

There was considerable audience reaction, but the commission went on to other business and then to lunch.

During lunch Mrs. Sundberg indicated to Mrs. Kaiser that she (Mrs. Sundberg) may have erred in her vote on the resolution because of incomplete understanding of the case. Mrs. Sundberg was told that a vote to reconsider would be proper parliamentary procedure.

After lunch, Mrs. Sundberg moved to reconsider the resolution, and reconsideration was approved 4 to 1.

According to Robert's Rules of Order, a reconsideration vote is intended to correct a hasty act, according to Mellon, who said the question is now "right back where it started."

The next commission meeting is in May in Los Angeles, and the agenda has not yet been drafted.

"My interpretation is there is a segment on the commission that does not see that any one landing site has such overwhelming evidence in support of it as to totally rule out the possibility of another location," Mellon said.

Thus some commissioners favor no action on the question, while others feel it would be better to say something than nothing, according to Mellon.

There is general agreement that Drake and his men camped for a month somewhere in the vicinity of San Francisco Bay while repairing and resupplying for the cross-Pacific leg of their world encircling voyage.

However accounts of his voyage and maps of the era lend credence to several possible sites near the 38th parallel, each of which has its fervent advocates.

San Quentin Cove and Drake's Estero are the two major candidates.

Resolution of the question would have a bearing on a celebration planned for Saturday, June 16 at Drake's Estero, marking the 400th anniversary of Drake's visit to California.

A re-enactment of Drake's landing is planned, with speakers, dignitaries, and possibly a member of the British royal family in attendance.

Raymond Aker, president of the Drake Navigators Guild, contends that Drake landed at the estero which now bears his name. The guild is an organization which has studied the question for many years.

Aker expressed disappointment at the March 2 proceedings.

Upon his return to England, Drake presented the log of his voyage to Queen Elizabeth I. It has been hoped that location of this document in the Royal Archives might resolve once and for all the question of where Drake landed in California. However a search of the archives has revealed no trace of it, Aker said.

A brass plate found in Marin County many years ago bore an inscription claiming the land for Queen Elizabeth. Whether or not the plate is the product of an elaborate hoax "depends on who you talk to," Mellon said.